Augustine and the Advent of Amillennialism

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The church father Augustine of Hippo is without a doubt the central figure associated with the eschatological view of amillennialism. His viewpoint became the prevailing doctrine of the Roman Church, and it was adopted with variations by most of the Protestant Reformers along with many other teachings of Augustine. To this day, it has become the basis for amillennialism, which would dominate the Christian church until well into the modern period.

Augustine is considered as the primary adventist of amillennialism primarily because there are no acceptable exponents of amillennialism before him. Prior to Augustine's formulation of the doctrine, various elements of amillennialism were associated with the heresies produced by the allegorizing and spiritualizing school of theology at Alexandria, which not only opposed premillennialism, but set out to abolish any literal exegesis of Scripture whatsoever. For Augustine, his main

concern was to understand the ‘spiritual’ message of the Old Testament in terms of allegories evolved by the Alexandrian school.

Augustine favoured the allegorical method of interpretation over other methods primarily because he believed that the Bible had been ‘veiled’ by God in order to ‘exercise’ the seeker. He believed that only the profound man could grasp the deeper meaning, the ‘spirit’. For beneath the deceptive simplicity of the Hebrew constructions from Old Testament passages, he had chosen to see the great complexity of his own views, veiled to the unenquiring mind, and a source of wonder to the philosopher.

Augustine’s exemplary literary catalyst, which propelled his viewpoint of amillennialism to the masses, was without a doubt his magnum opus work *City of God* (written from ca. AD 413 to ca. 426). In the book, Augustine describes the present age as a conflict between the City of God and the City of Satan, or the conflict between the church and the world. This was viewed as moving on to the ultimate triumph of the church to be climaxed by a tremendous struggle in which the church would be apparently defeated, only to consummate in a tremendous triumph in the second coming of Christ to the earth. Augustine held that the present age of conflict is the millennium and argues that many Christians misunderstand Revelation 20:1-6 by thinking that the first resurrection is physical and that the thousand years will be a form of Sabbath rest for God’s people. He, like Origen before him, views premillennialism as an overly extravagant event that turns the kingdom into an occasion for the exercise of gluttony and other lusts. Augustine writes, “This notion would be in some degree tolerable if it were believed that in that Sabbath some delights of a spiritual character were to be available for the saints because of the presence of the Lord. I also entertained this notion at one time. But in fact those people assert that those who have risen again will spend their rest in the most unrestrained material feasts.” Thus on trivial grounds, Augustine abandons the literal interpretation of Revelation 20. Somehow, for all his genius, he did not see that he could abandon this false teaching without abandoning the doctrine of a literal millennium.

As a consequence to his allegorical approach to spiritually interpreting the millennium as this present age, Augustine was therefore forced to interpret the bounding of Satan to be in effect in this present age as well. Yet, this idea poses obvious problems. While the Christian can have victory over Satan, there is no evidence whatsoever that Satan is presently inactive or bound in this present age. It can be stated flatly that Augustine’s exegesis is an outright error as far as the binding of Satan is concerned. The exegesis of Augustine on Revelation 20 as a

whole fares no better. After concluding that the binding of Satan is synonymous with the victory of Christ in His first advent, he draws the strained conclusion that the “first resurrection” of Revelation 20:5 is the spiritual birth of believers. To spiritualize this portion of Scripture to make it conform to the course of the present age is to destroy all its plain literary meaning. Augustine’s view required also, of course, the spiritualization of the many Old Testament passages bearing on the future righteous kingdom on earth, and this he does in his treatment of the Old Testament.

It would be fair to say that Augustine’s propagation of amillennialism has done an enormous amount of damage to the churches understanding of eschatology. It should be pointed out that his allegorical method of interpretation to develop the doctrine of amillennialism never existed before the likes of Clement and Origen and the Alexandrian School.

When it comes to Biblical prophecy, if the method of interpretation is wrong, it entirely disrupts the way people understand eschatology. The only people who work with prophetic texts with precision and care and specificity are those who interpret the Bible literally (as the Jews would understand it) and end up as premillennialists. Once you say that the scripture doesn’t mean what it says, then all precision is gone. It’s a tragic tale in church history that Augustine’s “few degrees off course” on this topic, has in the course of time in its set trajectory, sent the church off thousands of miles in the wrong direction. Things could have been so different provided more solid Biblical principles of interpretation were followed.

John F. Walvoord, ‘Amillennialism From Augustine To Modern Times’, in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 106, No. 424, Oct 1949, p. 420. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost [cited: May 3, 2013]

Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung (eds), *A Case for Historic Premillennialism*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 117.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1967) p. 154.

Ibid., 261.

Ibid.

Walvoord, *Amillennialism From Augustine To Modern Times*, 422.

Blomberg and Chung (eds), *A Case for Historic Premillennialism*, 116.

Augustine, *City of God* 20.7.

Augustine also wrote, “This opinion [a future literal millennium after the resurrection] might be allowed, if it proposed only spiritual delight unto the saints during this space (and we were once of the same opinion ourselves); but seeing the avouchers hereof affirm that the saints after this resurrection shall do nothing but revel in fleshly banquets, where the cheer shall exceed both modesty and measure, this is gross and fit for none but carnal men to believe. But they that are really and truly spiritual do call those of this opinion Chiliasts.” *City of God* 20.7.

Walvoord, *Amillennialism From Augustine To Modern Times*, 423.

Ibid., 424.

Ibid., 425.

Ibid.

Ibid.

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